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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that schools need to help students acquire knowledge and skills for two purposes: (1) to function effectively in a variety of contexts (including work) as they presently exist, and (2) to adapt to changing situations in the future. Effective functioning in the present requires a common body of knowledge, including mathematics, language skills, and geography, along with generalized skills for making adjustments in the body of knowledge (thinking skills, communication skills, and good personal habits). Adaptability is necessary because of the rapid pace of change; accordingly, emphasis on highly specific job-related skills is likely to be a disservice to students. The "bottom line" for schools is not to produce employability, but rather, to enable graduates to achieve improvement in the quality of their lives. (TE)

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The Bottom Line for Schools: Student Employability?

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The Bottom Line for Schools: Student Employability?

On November 28, 1984, two prominent educational periodicals printed the texts of the two most recent entries in the "What's Wrong with American Education?" sweepstakes. The Chronicle of Higher Education published the report of the National Endowment for the Humanities' Study Group entitled "To Reclaim a Legacy." According to this report the primary purpose of schools is to "transmit a culture to its rightful heirs." Furthermore, the study of humanities, at least in institutions of higher learning, is the primary vehicle for accomplishing this purpose.

On this same day Education Week printed the text of "The Unfinished Agenda: The Role of Vocational Education in the High School," a report issued by the National Commission on Secondary Vocational Education. This report implies that the ultimate purpose of schools is to "make youth employable, whatever the state of the economy." Furthermore, vocational education, coupled with a strong academic education prior to high school, is the key to achieving this goal.

These two reports simply represent the current perspectives on an ancient dilemma; that dilemma being, what is the primary purpose of schooling and formal education? The dilemma is phrased in different ways. Is education an end in itself, or a means to an end? Are schools for educating or training their students? Or, more in the context of these two recent reports, are schools intended to produce educated or employable persons?

Deep down inside we know that people can be both educated and employable. However, because of a variety of reasons, including the number of Carnegie units required for high school graduation, we tend to recall and emphasize in our pro and con arguments the overeducated, unemployable individuals or the uneducated, highly employable (and usually highly successful) individuals. That is, we rely on the exception to prove the rule.

I was asked to speak against the proposition that the bottom line for schools is making students employable. In doing so I could have adopted one or several approaches. I could have argued that the bottom line of schools is to make students unemployable; to do what they could to fill students' heads with interesting, abstract, totally useless information and skills. I could have argued against the position taken by the National Commission on Secondary

Vocational Education and for the position taken by the National Endowment for the Humanities. I will take neither approach.

Rather, I will argue that the bottom line of schools is improved quality of life -- both individually and collectively. Furthermore, I will argue that if schools are to get to this "bottom line," they must help students acquire two sets of knowledge and skills. The first set will enable students to function effectively in a variety of worlds (including the world of work) as they currently exist. The second set will enable them to adapt effectively to changing situations and demands in these various "worlds" in the future. Let me speculate about the nature of these two sets.

Effective Functioning

In order to function effectively in our personal, social, and business worlds students first need to acquire a body of knowledge. Initially, that body of knowledge will be the same for all students. That is, in primary and elementary grades knowledge of whole numbers, fractions, the alphabet, sight vocabulary, states and regions, and the like will form the common core of knowledge. Eventually, part of an individual's body of knowledge must become specialized. Thus, different students will acquire a greater in-depth knowledge in mathematics, while other students will acquire more diverse knowledge in a variety of subjects. The relationship between the common and specialized knowledge -- when one ends and the other begins; what proportion of the total body of knowledge should be comprised of each type -- is not altogether clear. In many ways this lack of a clear relationship underlies the varying points of view concerning the primary purpose of schooling taken by the authors of the two previously cited reports.

On thing is clear about the body of knowledge that must be acquired as a result of formal education. Somehow this body of knowledge must contain some mechanism or mechanisms for adding to it, deleting from it, or otherwise modifying it as necessary. That is to say, this body of knowledge can not be viewed as static or "in concrete." These mechanisms are likely to be some general skills or abilities that transcend any specific subject matter or content; skills or abilities such as differentiating fact from opinion, reality from fantasy, or "truth" from falsity. Additionally, students would need to decide when something new is a major development in a field, or a minor one soon to be discarded or forgotten. Students would need to decide when something is more effective or efficient that what is currently known or done. Students would need to learn to anticipate consequences of actions, and to consider various alternatives before taking actions. Once consequences were observed and the effect of various alternatives noted, then

the body of knowledge currently in place could be adjusted accordingly.

In many ways these mechanisms for making adjustments in the body of knowledge are more important that the content of the body of knowledge. This last statement is particularly true if the content consists of small, discrete, "behaviorally-defined" skills. Skills such as proper use of an awl, or setting the timing of ar automobile engine can be learned well in a very short period of time when the learner possesses a more general set of abilities that permit him or her to do so.

In order to function effectively in their personal, social, and business worlds, students also need to be able to communicate -- to read with comprehension, to listen and follow directions, to ask pertinent and clear questions, to write for a variety of purposes and audiences, and to explain their point of view or what they know in an intelligible manner. With the advent of modern computer technology, increased precision of communication is necessary; far more precision than allowed us to function effectively in the past. Almost everyone who has sat down with a computer has had the experience of a lack of communcation because of a comma out of place, or an improper command.

Communication among family members and business colleagues is becoming essential in this complex, fast moving world. The ability to listen, to ask the right question at the right time, and to explain our actions will likely have strong positive benefits on the quality of our family and business lives.

Finally, in order to function effectively we students must acquire a set of personal and professional characteristics and qualities. Traits such as truthworthiness, dependability, pride in ones work have always been important to success on the job and well-being in our families. A recent survey of the reasons personnel officers or managers gave for employees losing their jobs lends support to the importance of this "old-fashioned" personal characteristics. "Poor work habits, never on time, not dependable" was given as the number one reason by 41 percent of the personnel officers or managers responding to the survey. "General attitudes toward work" was the second most frequently given response. The importance of these traits and qualities for successful family life and social relations almost goes without saying.

Adaptability

One of these trait-like qualities that helps to ensure successful functioning in the future is adaptability. The need for adaptability is shown in the work of the futurists. One recent government study has estimated that 70 percent of today's kindergartenders will work at jobs (as adults) that have not yet been invented. As a consequence, an emphasis in our schools on highly

specific, so-called "job-related" skills will likely be a disservice to students over the long haul. Other studies are beginning to estimate the number of times during ones lifetime that career changes will take place. The standard estimate is now four.

From a social perspective (and even a more personal perspective) the ability to adapt is also crucial. Several studies have documented the major stages or "passages" through which we progress as we age. Will we able to traverse these passages smoothly? Or, will we hold on to our earlier selves, either because of fear of growing old, or because of a lack of ability to adapt to new situations and demands. As we age the family composition changes. How do we adapt to a child's leaving home? How do we adapt to the death of a spouse or loved one? Such adaptability just doesn't happen; it is taught and learned. At least the beginnings of this teaching and learning must take place in school.

In summary, then, the bottom line of schools is surely not employability, at least not in the narrow sense that many people use the term. The bottom line is improvement in the quality of life, both now and in the future, for individuals and for society. Education must open, rather than close, doors of opportunity for our students. If we overemphasize employability, then short term gains may result in devasting personal and societal losses.